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AUTHOR Kiely, Margaret C.
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ABSTRACT

The benefits of incorporating knowledge about creativity into the supervision of doctoral candidates are considered. It is suggested that supervisors of doctoral candidates should use the language of the creative process. The stages of the creative process can serve as a specific, verbalized reference point for supervision. From the beginning of the project, the candidate can be helped to understand the gestalt of the long, arduous period of the work on the dissertation in a more positive, challenging perspective. In choosing a topic and developing it into a proposal, the candidate is involved in the ability to combine, recombine, or transform the cognitive elements of a problem in a novel and adaptive way. An effort should be made to explain the specifics involved in the preparatory stage of creative problem solving. Next, time should be spent to help the candidate maintain an open cognitive system to help avoid the rigid categorizations that may arise. The doctoral process can be a stimulating experience if the inevitable blockages that occur are seen with the perspective of research findings on creativity. The process requires an alternation between openness and closure, since analytical perception can conflict with creative insight. Sensitivity in supervision implies a knowledge of the functioning of either too much or too little motivation. The creative process results in a creative product, but it also does something to the person, the effect of which may sometimes be more important than the concrete product which is produced. The individual may become sensitive to a new range of phenomena or may develop new strategies of problem solving, which are important outcomes in preparing for future creative activity. (SW)

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Creative sensitivity in doctoral research: the supervisor's contribution

Margaret C. Kiely, Ph.D.
Université de Montréal

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The purpose of this paper is to challenge those among you who are in any way connected with academia to consider the effects--beneficial effects--which might occur, if the vast knowledge available on creativity were to be integrated into the supervision of doctoral candidates. The challenge may well be a categorical imperative, in view of the statistics cited in David Sternberg's noteworthy book: "How to complete and survive a doctoral dissertation," published in 1981. Sternberg found that there are over 150,000 full-time or full-time-equivalent students in relevant dissertation-required doctoral programs in any given year. He writes:

> The 1980s will see more than half a million ABDs generated, a substantial percentage of whom (approximately 58%) will never finish the thesis. If one adds to the new ABDs the large, if precisely undetermined number of "veteran" ABDs who hang on year after year without progress, we see a large "social problem," perhaps even a crisis, in the midst of American graduate education (p. 26).

But it is not only the ABDs with whom I am concerned here. We must also consider those who complete their theses and receive their entry visas into the professional world. Just as we know that the experience of success or failure of the creative process can be expected to have deep-seated effects on the individual's attitude toward and readiness for future creative activities, so do we know that the process of doctoral research can effect not only the present but also the future professional life of the individual.

The completed dissertation can be self-validating in subsequent years and act as the springboard for similar long-term creative pursuits throughout one's career. It can indeed change one's life by conferring the right of entry into desired professional networks. The ordeal of the dissertation process, however, can result in postdissertation paralysis, where the dissertation becomes the end of a career rather than the beginning. This paralysis extends far beyond writing and researching.

The burnt-out, indifferent professor's teaching is often uninspired, and his counseling of students unenthusiastic. If he becomes a graduate faculty member, he is likely to pass his indifference and negativism on to a new generation of ABDs. The loss to society of a potentially creative group of professionals should be of serious concern to all of us who believe that the creative process enriches mankind.

It is important to recall that after finishing the predoctoral requirements, the dissertation writer is adrift. The support systems which are present at all other stages of the educational process cease to exist for the majority of ABDs, with the possible exception of those in the "hard sciences". These latter generally continue to work in a laboratory setting and are more assured of continuity of direction and the achievement of a degree. For those in the humanities and social sciences, however, the end of the course requirements means a move out of a valorizing environment into one which is permeated with "dissertation anomie." The stimulation and motivation which comes from working closely with fellow candidates has simply disappeared and the cyclical nature of administrative and faculty changes adds to this feeling of anomie. As Sternberg pointed out: there is no necessary relationship between the predoctoral period on the one hand, and the writing of the dissertation on the other.

This anomie is intensified when the candidate realizes that he may be totally unprepared for the important task of writing a dissertation. Rarely, if ever, in all of the course work and term papers and even in writing a master's thesis, has the candidate been confronted with the level of analytical and critical thought processes required for a doctoral thesis. What is more, as all of us know, writing a dissertation is a very lonely affair. Compounding the problem is the fact that the demands of academia on professors to do research and to publish means that they tend to invest more time and interest in these pursuits than in dissertation supervision. They realize very well that the latter activity counts for little in career advancement and career mobility. Awareness of this pragmatic situation only intensifies the anomie in the ABD.

I have presented the above in some detail in order to underline the need for greater sensitivity--creative sensitivity--on the part of those committed to doctoral supervision. The issue now arises as to how we can become more valuable and productive in this task.

First of all, I believe that we can use the language, the frame of reference of the creative process. This is to suggest that we should think, work, interpret the phases of the candidate's research in those terms. The dissertation period--from topic choice to doctoral degree--is a creative one. Supervisors do know that and many make reference to it, especially if the candidate is highly gifted. But I doubt if all the knowledge we possess of the stages of the creative process serves as a specific, verbalized reference point in our supervision. If psychologists working in the field of creativity do not think and work this way with ABDs, much less can we expect those in other fields to do so.

If we were to begin, from the very first encounter with an accepted candidate, to speak of his work in terms of the creative process and clearly explain what we mean by it, the individual could be helped to grasp the gestalt of the long, arduous period confronting him but also see it in a much more positive, challenging perspective.

I would preface my second point by asserting that regardless of how one conceptualizes the creative process, there is consensus that certain steps are involved. Whether one defines them descriptively or functionally is not important here. What is crucial is that we believe that the invention of a new problem is itself a creative act, indeed one of the highest forms of creativity. The doctoral candidate is striving exactly for just that--when he choses a topic and seeks to develop it into a viable proposal. Involved here is the ability to combine, recombine, or transform the cognitive elements of a problem in a novel and adaptive way. For such a creative transformation to succeed, the problem must be perceived and defined correctly--there must be a narrowing down and a simplification of a complex situation until the crucial difficulty in the task is isolated. Thus, instead of wondering whether a candidate will ever get past his vague, way-out ideas, perhaps we should explain the specifics involved in the preparatory stage of creative problem-solving.

Stein's research has clearly shown that the most highly creative researchers devote much more time to this first phase of analyzing the problem and understanding the elements involved, than they do in resolving it. They know that a clearly stated problem contains the elements of the solution.

Next, we should spend more time enabling the candidate to maintain an open cognitive system, thus helping him to avoid the rigid categorizations so swift to arise in the face of cognitive dissonance. Perhaps we could present the ABD with the six necessary characteristics of the appropriate elements which are the essential conditions for the occurrence of a creative combination or transformation.

Three. The doctoral process can be a stimulating, valorizing experience for the candidate and ourselves if the inevitable blockages which occur are seen within the perspective of research findings on creativity. For example, we know that the rigid persistence of a misleading set can stop the process midstream; that the necessary task of schematizing and categorizing can also fatally interfere with it; that there is a need for an analytical attitude which is to dissemble, but which may also destroy the essential attributes of the problem. If we are sensitive to the fact that efficient, economical and analytical perception can be the enemy of creative insight, we may be able to help the individual realize that the process requires an oscillation between openness and closure. Possibly nowhere else as in doctoral research does the compelling tendency toward establishing a clear and simple cognitive structure play havoc with creativity. I believe that our challenge is to assist him in maintaining his mental processes as a kind of open system, even though the pressure of the doctoral period augers against suspending the boundaries among cognitions and keeping them permeable. It is difficult to sustain periods during which conflicting and disorganized information and ideas must exist side by side in one's thinking. Sensitive supervision can ameliorate this inherent tension.

Four. If we can assume that the incubation period does have a facilitative effect, we should be able to interpret that pause as a creative one which allows unconscious processessing to occur. For the dissertation writer, such a period is frustrating and threatening and the force of cognitive effort cannot conquer it. He feels that

he has come to a complete halt. If we were to explain the nature and importance of incubation for the creative process, much of the anxiety and prolonged discouragement involved in his perception of dead stop could be averted. Furthermore, we could carry out research with those doctoral candidates on how the benefits stemming from the incubation period can be achieved in more efficient ways. Supervision is an ideal place for suggesting a choice of activities calculated to have the greatest likelihood of providing the very kinds of stimuli and cues needed.

My fifth point concerns motivation and the creative process. We know that there can be too little or too much, but the real problem comes in the struggle to achieve a balance between the pull of intrinsic and extrinsic forces. Sensitivity in supervision implies a knowledge of the functioning of these two poles of the motivation continuum, and an awareness of the threat to the creative process which occurs when one or the other becomes all-important. The whole context of doctoral research in the world of academia makes this a difficult but challenging task.

Six. The creative process results in a creative product but it also does something to the person, the effect of which may sometimes be more important than the concrete product which is produced. The individual may become sensitized to a new range of phenomena; may come to envision a new set of problems; may develop new strategies of problem-solving. All of these have obvious importance in preparing for future and possibly greater creative activity. Research has indeed shown that the experience of success or failure of the creative process can be expected to have deep-seated effects on the individual's attitude toward and readiness for further creative activities. If we were to apply these findings to the doctoral candidate who survives the dissertation, it is easy to see how a much broader perception of the experience is possible. The completion of the thesis confirms a sense of competence, of accomplishment, of personal worth, but ameliorating that process would enhance the sense of fulfillment and act as a motivating force to continue, simply because there has been a lived, integrated experience of creative problem-solving. Another way of saying this/that creative sensitivity in the supervision is of doctoral candidates implies that the process be highly valorized and that the

all-consuming attention given to the product be kept in perspective. If the process is viable, the product is assured.

This is not to denigrate the product--the finished dissertation--but to assert that if more emphasis were given to the process itself, many more ABDs would finish the race. Those that will finish it at all costs could look back upon it in a much more positive manner.

My final point is this: a perusal of the topics of this division confirms the attention given to creativity in children, adolescents, artists, etc., which is at it should be. What I am suggesting is that those involved in supervision consider the statistics presented at the beginning of this paper, pause a moment and reflect on the fact that for many highly intelligent, creative graduate students, the dissertation process may be the point at which much--if not all--that has been gained throughout the educational system may be irrevocably lost.

It has been said that sensitivity is to the artist or the scientist what a delicate lens is to the camera. It is my belief that if we were to translate our academic attitude on doctoral supervision into the sensitive supervision of the creative process, we, as well as those with whom we work, would be richly rewarded.

Sternberg, D. How to complete and survive a doctoral dissertation. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981.